

NOTES ON THE IRISH HOUSE

BY ÅKE CAMPBELL, UPPSALA

121 In the discussions on the complicated problems of the European house traditions, the peasant Irish house has hitherto been almost ignored, in spite of the fact that the Irish house could certainly yield some important information. Ireland constitutes a reservoir of Celtic and other traditions of great antiquity and of special importance for the moulding of European folk-culture.¹

To study the Irish peasant house, it is first of all necessary to make detailed field surveys for all parts of Ireland and then to compare these with the results of similar investigations in all related countries. But not less important is it to consider these conclusions in the light of the information we get in the Ancient Irish Laws (the culture here described dates from pagan times i. e. prior to the middle of the 5th century A. D.) the literature (particularly the Heroic tales of the Ulster cycle), and the vocabulary of the older language as well as that of the modern Irish dialects.

128 Postponing for further discussion (in part II of this article) the buildings of very archaic constructions, viz. the stone beehive huts or rectangular huts roofed by a system of overlapping stones and the most primitive or simplified house types (huts of wickerwork, sod, turf), I will here firstly consider Irish houses, stone-built and mudhouses with roof resting on wooden couples. These houses represent a slightly more developed stage of construction than the above mentioned types. They are all inhabited in modern times.²

341 It is a remarkable fact that even the most primitive Irish houses still inhabited — houses with only one room showing traces of its original task to shelter both the human family and the cattle, walls built without mortar, fireplace without any chimney etc. — are already divided into two principal types, namely (1) the house with the fire-place placed somewhere near the centre of the house or at least not just at the gablewall, so there are bedplaces behind the fire-place in the upper end of the house, often thatched gables, and (2) the house with stone-built gables and the fireplace close to the gable wall. In a former article (Béaloideas 1935 p. 57 et sq.) I have

- 341 called the first type *the central-chimney house*, because the chimney will be erected over the fire-place somewhere about the middle of the roof, (fig. 1 and pl. XLI: 1, 2, 3; the second *the gable chimney house* because here the chimney will be close to the gable often being built as a part of the stone-built gable (fig. 2 and pl. XLI: 2). The outside chimney then not seldom forms a pronounced gabletop or gable-finial.

The Central-chimney house.

- 342 Some of the most primitive houses I found in Ireland belong to the central chimney house type. To illustrate I choose a house from Spiddle, Co. Galway (fig. 3 and pl. XLI: 1). The house is said to have been built before 1839 and to have withstood the "big wind" of that year. How old it actually is I had no means of discovering. The walls are of stone with the mortar put on afterwards on the inside and outside, but not used in the actual construction of the walls. Some outhouses belonging to this farm are all of dry wall construction. The roof of straw rests on couples of beams, supported on the inner edge of the walls, so that the thatch does not quite reach as far as the outside edge of the wall, but leaves a narrow space uncovered.

[17] This is an archaic feature found now in very old buildings in Ireland, as always in the black houses of Scotland.

The house is built on a slope, so that the fireplace end of the house lies higher than the entrance door. There is only one room, but a low partition wall at the back of the fire cuts off a section which is used as a bedroom.

- [352] In the lower end of the house a dresser is placed so that it together with a small table cuts off another section that nowadays is also used as a bedroom. Some stools, a cradle and a churn are the other contents. There are two doors opposite of each other, both provided with half-doors. The fireplace consists of some flat stones on the floor. Over the fireplace there is a

[354] wattled chimney resting on two beams, supported by a cross beam. The chimney is adapted to a hole in the thatched roof, so there is no outside chimney. On one side of the house, the sheltered side, there are two windows.

- [23] About other houses of the same kind, I have heard from the inhabitants that in olden times the lower end of the house was used for the cattle. In late times the cattle have been removed to an outhouse and this part of the house has been adopted as a living room.

- 342 The division of the house into three sections, which is characteristic of the
171 central-chimney house type, is quite clear in the Scottish houses, namely the black houses, the bedroom being at the upper end of the house behind the

[Text continues top of p. 211]

Ake Campbell: Notes on the Irish house

342 fire, and the byre at the lower end of the house. In the Welsh long-house
171 the hearth generally seems to face the living room and bedroom part of the house, and cuts these sections from the byre part. The two doors, opposite to each other, very typical of the Irish house (see p. 217), are also found in the Welsh long-houses, but here the space between the two doors has a more pronounced feeding-walk character, than we find common in Ireland, at least to-day when the cattle are generally removed from the dwelling house. For the three sections of some South Scandinavian houses see p. 222.

The gable-chimney house.

342 In various parts of Ireland I have found numbers of primitive houses
with stone-built gables. These houses are always rectangular in form, never oval. Externally the type varies greatly depending mostly on the prevailing wind. On the coast, in very windy districts, the roof will not be built very high, but in more sheltered parts, it will be more lofty.

The gable finial, the gable top often constitutes a very characteristic feature of this house-type, pl. XLII: 2. Only where the low roof is used, the gable top is not especially accentuated. The outside chimney constitutes the gable top of the chimney-gable. On the opposite gable the gable-finial may be formed in a corresponding way, as a chimneyshaft without any flue. The chimneyshafts at the gables form perhaps the single example in the Irish peasant house of intentional architecture conforming with a wide-spread custom in Western Europe. As regards the serrated gable-ends see p. 226.

342 In small dwellings of this type there is only one room, the fireplace is situated against one gable-wall. The most convenient place for the beds is beside the fire, and at least one bed is to be found here. This is a very original feature of this house-type which is confirmed by Scottish material, old Irish descriptions, and even drawings. In the middle-west and north of Ireland, the bed is built in a projection outwards, *cailleach*, or at least in a niche in the side wall close to the fireplace, pl. XLII: 2, as in the Scottish *tig dubh*.

342 As in the central-chimney house, there are sometimes two doors opposite each other, but even a single door is common in small old houses.

Windows have come at a later period here also. In old-fashioned houses there is generally only one window, sometimes none at all.

342 At the lower end of the house, there was in more remote times place for
231 domestic animals. The division of the room by means of the dresser may have been adopted at an early stage, the dresser being especially suitable as

NOTES ON THE IRISH HOUSE. II.

BY ÅKE CAMPBELL, UPPSALA

341 In the Ireland of today there exist not only buildings of a more developed stage of construction, i. e. stone-built or mud houses with roofs resting on wooden couples¹ but also buildings of very archaic or of extremely simplified or primitive construction. The stone beehive huts, roofed by a [172] system of overlapping stones and some oval or oblong houses are identical with or closely linked with prehistoric house-types. The huts of wickerwork, sod and turf, on the other hand, represent very simple house-types, of which not all can with certainty be characterized as archaic, but rather as imitations in a simplified form of advanced house-types, or as simple temporary structures, or solutions of individual building problems often due to poverty or lack of better building material.

These groups of buildings offer possibilities of very wide, but at the same time very vague, comparisons throughout the fields of archaeological, historic literary and ethnological facts.

341 Ireland's cultural position is of great interest, whether Ireland be looked upon as a relic-zone where many culture-elements still persist after they 171 have become extinct in Continental Europe, or whether it be supposed to constitute a critical point in the Atlantic intercepting the different streams of culture flowing from North, South, and East.²

There are features common to Irish and Scandinavian archaic or primitive buildings, to Irish and Spanish-Portuguese buildings or to Irish and English buildings, but it would be premature to come to any decision about the origin of these features until the whole area of their distribution has been surveyed. Adapting T. J. Westropp's words about the ancient Irish "Forts" I would say: The key to the origin of the Irish house-types lies as much in a comparison with cognate buildings over the rest of Europe as in the native Irish records.

As it is not possible to arrive at any definite conclusions until investigations have been made on a broader basis, I must content myself here with pointing out some types of buildings and some problems which seem to me to be of certain importance.

343a smokehole which I have found, was an ancient sweating bath, *teach allais*, in Co. Mayo. This building is square in form.

171 Thomas's material is however interesting from a certain point of view. From prehistoric times are found agglomerations of round, oblong and square houses in Ireland (e. g. Skellig-Michael), in Wales* and in other parts of the British Isles. The same mixture of round and square or oblong buildings can be observed in Portugal,¹⁰ Spain and elsewhere in Western and Southern Europe.

From Thomas's material we now learn what an *inhabited* settlement of this kind looks like. In Lewis, for example, the stone-roofed circular houses, *bothan*, have been erected in the same *gearraidhean*, i. e. place for booleying, as the timber-roofed huts, *aridhean*.¹¹ We are forced to infer that round, oval, oblong, square buildings must be studied with regard to each other and with regard to different constructions in timber, branches, sods, stone etc.

The *oblong form* of building can obviously have developed or been invented in a number of ways, as there are varying antecedent conditions in different cases.¹² There is however *one* oval or oblong form of building which may have its origin in the stone-built domed-roofed bee-hive house.

The construction with a domed roof does not permit of much widening of the space between the walls. Even if very long and suitable flag-stones are at hand, the limits for the cyclopean arch will make it impossible for the primitive builder to enlarge the circumference of his house to any great degree. To get more room he must put two or more circular bee-hive buildings together, or he must go over to the oval or oblong form. Thomas himself touches upon the problem in these words: "It is evident that in this style of architecture (domed roofed buildings) the size of the rooms is limited by the nature of the stone; and although a tolerably safe roof may be made in this manner with rough moor-stones to cover an area of six feet it would have a most uncomfortable and suspicious appearance if extended over twice those dimensions (six or seven feet in diameter). Even in the Orkneys where is abundance of flag stone, although there are chambers there forty-five feet long the breadth was only five feet."

342 To elucidate this important problem the Irish oval *clochán* offers us the most valuable material. I refer to the series of photographs, kindly placed at my disposal by the distinguished author of *The Islands of Ireland*, Thomas Mason.¹⁴ This *clochán* (*Clochán na Carraighe*, Inishmore Island, Aran, Co. Galway, pl. 30 a, 31, and 32) is of oval shape, the entrance door being at the long sidewall. The roof is made of overlapping stones, one row of large slabs covering the space between the two long sides of the roof, which are

311
361
341



FIG. 2—Ballyhillin, a present-day clachan near Malin Head, County Donegal.



FIG. 3—Kiltullagh, a hamlet of a form common in County Galway. The regularity in the arrangement of the houses is possibly the result of the activity of a former landlord, though it is noticeable that the houses are not perfectly oriented to the road. (Photograph from Irish Press.)